

# Jean's focus is on **ELITE LEVEL**



*Jean Van Overmeire – the apprentice is working hard on rising through the ranks*

## AFTER ALMOST EVERY RACE RIDE, JEAN VAN OVERMEIRE WILL APPROACH A SENIOR RIDER AND PICK THEIR BRAIN ABOUT WHAT HE COULD HAVE DONE BETTER

WORDS: RAY HICKSON PICTURE: BRADLEY PHOTOGRAPHERS

**T**here's a wealth of talent in the Sydney jockey's room and emerging apprentice Jean Van Overmeire has some ambitious goals so is determined to make use of that experience.

"I'd watch the replay with one of the guys and talk about how the race could have unfolded if I did do something different," Van Overmeire said.

"I'd love to end up at the top level and that's exactly where I'm going to go."

Big call. But the South African-born 23-year-old's journey to Australia – where the number of South Africans in the industry took him by surprise – is quite a tale.

He's made a habit of learning from the best in the business since he decided on a career in horse racing as an early teen. That career, however, wasn't always going to be as a jockey.

Jean Van Overmeire grew up on a farm near Bloemfontein in The Free State province of South Africa and that's where his passion for horses was born.

Ponies, not racehorses.

"I always used to gallop around the farm thinking I was a cowboy, jumping over logs," he recalled.

"A young kid I was always trying to race my own shadow. Sometimes I'd just jump on without a bridle or saddle and they'd take off on me and I'd cling on for dear life. I loved every second of it."

He didn't experience horse racing until he was about 10 on a visit to England, where he and his Belgian-born father watched it on TV. It inspired him to want to race his ponies but that didn't get off the ground.

After migrating with his mother and brother to join his father in the UK a couple of years later, he found an after-school gig working for the likes of Roger Varian and Stuart Williams whose Newmarket stables weren't far from his home at Red

Lodge.

In September 2012, on his 18th birthday, Van Overmeire rode his lone winner in the UK; a horse called Emkanaat at Wolverhampton.

It wasn't a pretty ride – three deep throughout – and after another 12 winless months he figured riding wasn't for him.

*With an eye on a foreman or assistant trainer role he sought out countryman Mike de Kock, a champion trainer in Dubai, and hounded him for four months before securing a job.*

"He's one of the best trainers in the world and I thought it'd be great to get in with him and see what he can teach me," he said.

"Even though there were a lot of trainers in Dubai he was the first person that came to mind.

"Being South African, I wanted to work for him and I knew I could learn a lot from him. I had to put a lot of effort in but eventually he agreed to it."

While in Dubai he ran a barn and rode trackwork and he also happened to meet Jack Bruce, now Warwick Farm trainer Bjorn Baker's racing manager, who was placed at de Kock's stable as part of the Darley Flying Start program.

When Bruce moved to Sydney to work for Baker he encouraged Van Overmeire to do the same and advised him to throw the saddle in the luggage in case he wanted to give riding another go.

De Kock had also once suggested that Australia offered more opportunities for a jockey and that

stuck with him.

"I still came to Australia with a mindset of trying to fall into a foreperson role or assistant trainer," he said.

"I wasn't sure which way I was going to go. Once I got a feel for how they work over here with trackwork and watched the racing I thought I'd have a go at it while I'm still young.

"If it didn't work out I could always fall back on the other side."

Bruce started with Baker in June 2015 and Van Overmeire landed in Sydney about three months later but Visa issues meant he couldn't ride in races for almost a year.

His first Australian winner came at the Sapphire Coast on August 7 in 2016 on a mare called Our Brown Eyed Gal but his momentum was halted with an extended absence following a fall in November that year.

Despite missing three months, Van Overmeire made short work of his country claim and a maiden city win finally came in June 2017 on the Bjorn Baker-trained Samadoubt.

That plan to get to the top is certainly a long range one but he is gradually climbing the ladder in the apprentice ranks in New South Wales.

With two years left as an apprentice, his immediate goal is to lose the provincial claim before setting his sights on being a more regular presence in town – and chasing an apprentices title.

"Next season I want to step up to the city full-time and if everything goes to plan it leaves me two years to get rid of my city claim," he said.

"I've had my ups and downs. Everyone goes through thinking it's not for them, mostly to do with injuries.

"You recover from it, have a few motivational speeches given to you and you carry on. Mine is a funny story but a good story and I wouldn't change any of it." **RNSW**